

Rotating Extension Column
For Immediate Release
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Let's Encourage Locally Produced Food

The ripple effect from Hurricane Katrina has caused many Northwest Florida residents to reflect and do some soul searching. Though our experience with this hurricane was nothing like that felt to our West, it certainly helped to put some things in perspective.

Fuel shortages literally changed our daily activities for several days. Most of us were forced to set priorities such as eliminating unnecessary trips and better consolidation of travel to handle previously routine business.

The catastrophe along the central Gulf Coast has had effects far beyond the immediate area of impact. In our area, low supplies of gasoline are first to come to mind but diesel fuel was limited too. I know of one young man who was laid off from work on a large farm within a few days after the storm because the farmer could get no diesel fuel. This particular farm is in another state and is almost three hundred miles from the coast.

The fall harvest season has begun locally and Santa Rosa County is currently producing peanuts on 20,043 acres. A conservative estimate is that 30,000 tons of peanuts must be dug, combined, processed, shipped and distributed. All of these operations require energy in some form.

Peanuts are only one example of a food product. Which brings to mind: what if we went to shop and in addition to no gas, there was no food on the shelves? Come to think of it about a week after Katrina, some of the shelves were looking somewhat bare. I recall a period of a few days following the storm that some of my favorite brands were not available.

The abundant food supply that we enjoy is due in part to the efficiency of our farmers as well as a good distribution and marketing system. The system has worked well for many years, but a catastrophe such as a hurricane affecting fuel supplies, roads and other infrastructure can have severe negative impacts upon this interconnected production, shipping and marketing system.

We are all so dependant, downright spoiled by this finely tuned system that supplies fuel, food and other necessities so consistently that any interruption causes alarm.

It is doubtful that any of us will ever be self sustaining to the point that we are not dependant upon others that produce food, energy and other necessities. Though we can't return to the pioneer days we can begin to look closer to home for some consumer items.

A lot of food is produced locally and with a little help from consumers it is possible to purchase locally grown beef, vegetables, fruits and nuts. The biggest challenge is not in the production, but in the marketing of these products. We have the soil, growers, land and equipment to produce, but connecting the producer with the consumer is not as easy as it might seem.

Many people are working, mostly behind the scenes, trying to help develop an efficient way of marketing local produce. Though progress has been made through the Milton Riverwalk Market and other efforts, there is still a long way to go.

More public support is needed. Any time that you need fresh produce, purchase from a local grower when possible. This helps to encourage our farmers and just might result in a more consistent, dependable food supply close to home.